

## Frequently Asked Questions and Answers on the 2019 Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) and Animals

### What causes COVID-19?

Coronaviruses (CoV) are a family of RNA (ribonucleic acid) viruses. They are called coronaviruses because the virus particle exhibits a characteristic ‘corona’ (crown) of spike proteins around its lipid envelope. CoV infections are common in animals and humans. Some strains of CoV are zoonotic, meaning they can be transmitted between animals and humans, but many strains are not zoonotic.

In humans, CoV can cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (caused by MERS-CoV), and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (caused by SARS-CoV). Detailed investigations have demonstrated that SARS-CoV was transmitted from civets to humans, and MERS-CoV from dromedary camels to humans.

In December 2019, human cases of pneumonia of unknown origin were reported in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China (People’s Rep. of). A new CoV was identified as the causative agent by Chinese Authorities. Since then, human cases have been reported by almost all countries around the world and the COVID-19 event has been declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) to be a pandemic. For up to date information please consult the [WHO website](#).

The CoV which causes COVID-19 has been named as SARS-CoV-2 by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV); this is the scientific name. The virus may also be referred to as “the COVID-19 virus” or “the virus responsible for COVID-19”. COVID19 refers to the disease caused by the virus.

- **Are animals responsible for COVID-19 in people?**

The predominant route of transmission of COVID-19 is from human to human.

Current evidence suggests that the COVID-19 virus emerged from an animal source. Genetic sequence data reveals that the COVID-19 virus is a close relative of other CoV found circulating in *Rhinolophus* bat (Horseshoe Bat) populations. However, to date, there is not enough scientific evidence to identify the source of the COVID-19 virus or to explain the original route of transmission to humans (which may have involved an intermediate host).

Investigations are needed to find the source, to determine how the virus entered the human population, and establish the potential role of an animal reservoir in this disease.

Priorities for research to investigate the animal source were discussed by the OIE informal advisory group on COVID-19, now the OIE *ad hoc* Group on COVID-19 and the human-animal Interface, and were presented at the WHO Global Research and Innovation Forum (11-12 February 2020) by the President of the OIE Wildlife Working Group. For more information on the OIE *ad hoc* Group on COVID-19 and the human-animal Interface and the WHO R and D roadmap please see the links under ‘more information’ at the bottom of this page.

- **Can animals be infected with COVID-19 virus?**

Now that COVID-19 virus infections are widely distributed in the human population there is a possibility for some animals to become infected through close contact with infected humans. Infection of animals with COVID-19 virus may have implications for animal health and welfare, and for wildlife conservation.

Several dogs and cats (domestic cats and a tiger) have tested positive to COVID-19 virus following close contact with infected humans. Further information reported to the OIE can be found below in the 'more information' section.

Studies are underway to better understand the susceptibility of different animal species to the COVID-19 virus and to assess infection dynamics in susceptible animal species.

Preliminary findings from laboratory studies suggest that, of the animal species investigated so far, cats are the most susceptible species for COVID-19, and cats can be affected with clinical disease. In the laboratory setting cats were able to transmit infection to other cats. Ferrets also appear to be susceptible to infection but less so to disease. In the laboratory setting ferrets were also able to transmit infection to other ferrets. Dogs appear to be susceptible to infection but appear to be less affected than ferrets or cats. Egyptian fruit bats were also infected in the laboratory setting but did not show signs of disease or the ability to transmit infection efficiently to other bats.

To date, preliminary findings from studies suggest that poultry and pigs, are not susceptible to SARS-CoV-2 infection.

Currently, there is no evidence to suggest that animals infected by humans are playing a role in the spread of COVID-19. Human outbreaks are driven by person to person contact.

- **What do we know about COVID-19 virus and companion animals?**

*The current spread of COVID-19 is a result of human to human transmission. To date, there is no evidence that companion animals play a significant role in spreading the disease. Therefore, there is no justification in taking measures against companion animals which may compromise their welfare.*

Some examples of animal infections have been reported to the OIE. Further details on these events can be found in the 'more information' section. So far, these appear to be isolated cases, and there is no evidence that companion animals are playing a role in the spread of human disease.

Preliminary findings from laboratory studies suggest that, of the animal species investigated so far, cats are the most susceptible species for COVID-19, and cats can be affected by clinical disease. In the laboratory setting cats were able to transmit infection to other cats. Ferrets also appear to be susceptible to infection but less so to disease. In the laboratory setting ferrets were able to transmit infection to other ferrets. Dogs appear to be susceptible to infection but appear to be less affected than ferrets or cats.

To date, preliminary findings from studies suggest that poultry and pigs, are not susceptible to SARS-CoV-2 infection.

- **What precautionary measures should be taken when companion or other animals have close contact with human's sick or suspected with COVID-19?**

Currently, there is no evidence that companion animals are playing a significant epidemiological role in this human disease. However, because animals and people can sometimes share diseases (known as zoonotic diseases), it is still recommended that people who are sick with COVID-19 limit contact with companion and other animals.

When handling and caring for animals, basic hygiene measures should always be implemented. This includes hand washing before and after being around or handling animals, their food, or supplies, as well as avoiding kissing, licking or sharing food.

When possible, people who are sick with COVID-19 should avoid close contact with their pets and have another member of their household care for their animals. If they must look after their pet, they should maintain good hygiene practices and wear a face mask if possible. Animals belonging to owners infected with COVID-19 should be kept indoors as much as possible and contact with those pets should be avoided as much as possible.

- **What can National Veterinary Services do with regards to companion animals?**

Public Health and Veterinary Services should work together using a One Health approach to share information and conduct a risk assessment when a person with COVID-19 reports being in contact with companion or other animals.

If a decision is made as a result of a risk assessment to test a companion animal which has had close contact with a person/owner infected with COVID-19, it is recommended that RT-PCR be used to test oral, nasal and fecal/rectal samples. Care should be taken to avoid contamination of specimens from the environment or by humans.

Animals that test positive for COVID-19 should be kept away from unexposed animals and contact with those animals should be avoided as much as possible.

- **Are there any precautions to take with live animals or animal products?**

Although there is uncertainty about the origin of the COVID-19 virus, in accordance with advice offered by the WHO, as a general precaution, when visiting live animal markets, wet markets or animal product markets, general hygiene measures should be applied. These include regular hand washing with soap and potable water after touching animals and animal products, as well as avoiding touching eyes, nose or mouth, and avoiding contact with sick animals or spoiled animal products. Any contact with other animals possibly living in the market (e.g., stray cats and dogs, rodents, birds, bats) should be avoided. Precaution should be taken to avoid contact with animal waste or fluids on the soil or surfaces of shops and market facilities.

Standard recommendations issued by WHO to prevent infection spread include regular hand washing, covering mouth and nose with the elbow when coughing and sneezing and avoiding close contact with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness such as coughing and sneezing. As per general good food safety practices, raw meat, milk or animal organs should be handled with care, to avoid potential cross-contamination with uncooked foods. Meat from healthy livestock that is prepared and served in accordance with good hygiene and food safety principles remains safe to eat. Further recommendations from WHO can be consulted.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission has adopted several practical guidelines on how to apply and implement best practices to ensure food hygiene (Codex General Principles of Food Hygiene, CXC 1- 1969), handle meats (Codex Code of Hygienic Practice for Meat, CXC 58 – 2005), and control viruses in foods (Guidelines for the Application of General Principles of Food Hygiene to the Control of Viruses in Food (CAC/GL 79-2012) and others which can be consulted on the [Codex website](#).

Based on currently available information, there is no scientific evidence to justify introduction of additional sanitary measures for the international trade of animals or animal products for countries reporting cases of COVID-19 in humans. Similarly, precautions for packaging materials are unnecessary over and above the observation of basic hygiene, such as ensuring it is clean and free of visible contamination.

- **What are the Veterinary Authority's international responsibilities in this event?**

The infection of animals with COVID-19 virus meets the criteria of an emerging disease. Therefore, any (case of) infection of animals with the COVID-19 virus in (including information about the species, diagnostic tests, and relevant epidemiological information) should be reported to the OIE in accordance with the OIE *Terrestrial Animal Health Code*.

It is important for Veterinary Authorities to remain informed and maintain close liaison with public health authorities and those responsible for wildlife, to ensure coherent and appropriate risk communication messages and risk management. It is important that COVID-19 does not lead to inappropriate measures being taken against domestic or wild animals which might compromise their welfare and health or have a negative impact on biodiversity.

In some countries, National Veterinary Services are supporting core functions of the public health response, such as screening and testing of surveillance and diagnostic samples from humans. Veterinary clinics in some countries are also supporting the public health response by donating essential materials such as personal protective equipment and ventilators.

Guidance on Veterinary Laboratory Support to the Public Health Response for COVID-19 is available at the bottom of this document.

<https://www.oie.int/scientific-expertise/specific-information-and-recommendations/questions-and-answers-on-2019novel-coronavirus/>

Published by

ICAR National Institute of Veterinary Epidemiology and Disease Informatics  
Post Box No. 6450, Ramagondanahalli, Yelahanka, Bengaluru 560064, Karnataka.  
Email: [director.nivedi@icar.gov.in](mailto:director.nivedi@icar.gov.in), [www.nivedi.res.in](http://www.nivedi.res.in)